THE SACRED JOURNEY

1. Adventure

March 11, 1990

8:30 and 11:00 a.m. Worship Services

John M. Buchanan

Fourth Presbyterian Church, Chicago

Scripture
John 3:1-17
Genesis 12:1-9

"Now the Lord said to Abram, 'Go from your country and your kindred and your father's house to the land that I will show you...' So Abram went,...journeyed on,..." -Genesis 12:1, 4, 9 (RSV)

Can you imagine the day when Abraham and Sarah tried to explain it to their neighbors? Abraham is seventy-five. Sarah is at least that old. They have no children.. What they have, of course, is each other, and the comfortable routines of fifty years or so of life together. Since the day longer ago than they can remember, the day when Abraham's father Terah moved the whole family to Haran, they had lived in one place. Abraham and Sarah were settled, established, comfortable. There's something nice about that... something good about knowing you don't have to move anymore, that this is the place you can expect to live out your days. There is something comforting about the daily routine and ritual by which time is measured: up at 7:00; coffee and newspaper at 7:30; walk the dog at 8:00; lunch, cocktails, dinner, and TV until bed time; the buffet at the club on Thursdays; not exciting, but no surprises, no problems. Abraham and Sarah are settled, substantial, mature people. Can you imagine the day when they tell the neighbors they are selling their place, having a garage sale, withdrawing their money from the bank, and leaving? "Where are you going, Abraham? To a retirement village, maybe?" "Well, actually not. Actually, we don't know exactly where we're going. We're headed for the promised land, but we really don't know where it is. So, we're trusting God to show us the way, and to provide for us. And - we hate to mention it - but we're expecting that sometime soon Sarah's going to be pregnant. So we'll be parents, not just of a child, but a whole new nation. That's a whole other story! Anyway, we're leaving."

Can't you imagine the neighbors first trying to talk them out of it? "Don't leave home! Enjoy! You've worked hard and done well. You're home safe. Don't throw it all away for a wild dream. You don't know what you're getting into. Things will never be the same again." [See Going

Home, Robert Raines, p. 27] As Abraham and Sarah continue packing, can't you see the neighbors rolling their eyes at this peculiar pair of old eccentrics about to do something if not absolutely crazy than terribly unlikely and inappropriate... and frightening!

We do know a little about moving. In fact, we are more mobile than anybody before us. The average American will move from place to place thirteen times during his or her lifetime, ten times as an adult. The proportion of the population which lives in one place only is now 3%. Every year 17% of us move... [Population of the United States - Historical Trends, 1985] Until a generation ago, many people never moved at all, or what moving they did was down the street, or across town. In the old country, generations lived in the same house. We have visited the farm where they all lived for centuries. Our parents lived within a several square mile area all their lives. We have packed up and moved five times, and that's fairly stable. Contemporaries of mine have moved twelve, fifteen, twenty times. IBM, I've been told ruefully by a sequence of friends who have passed through my life, stands for "I've Been Moved."

We know about separation anxiety and the psychological dynamics of loss, and that moving is like losing something precious which in fact it is, and how we can anticipate the occurrence of the grief process - numbness, depression, guilt and anger. This business of moving from place to place leaves us with some emotional fragility and maybe even poverty in addition to exhilaration and energy. We also know that when Genesis 12 says a settled seventy-five year old couple hear God telling them to move and promising them a child, and they actually do it, actually trust the voice and move, the Bible is saying something either very silly or very important.

This story of Abraham and Sarah is arguably the most important story in the Bible. In the Abraham saga the Bible makes its first and most breathtaking assertions about the one God. In the first two chapters of Genesis there are stories of creation, a great flood, a high tower and people unable to communicate with one another. There is nothing unique about the theological assertion that God is creator, nor that there are perimeters within which the creatures must live, and that there are severe consequences when these boundaries are crossed. What starts to emerge in the 12th chapter of Genesis is an utterly different idea of God. This is a God who is not content with the way things are in creation, and so makes a people, a family, a nation to reflect the true intent of the creation. This is a God who enters into conversation with people, has a relationship with them. This is an altogether different God who is always making new and unlikely things happen and who expects people to not be too settled, to live loosely, to be mobile enough to respond to the new things God is doing. This is a God who prefers a tent to a building; a God who is suspicious of temples and the trappings of religion; a God who likes to be on the way - in the wilderness - with the people. This is a God whose love allows people freedom and promises to be with them always. This is a God to trust when God calls people to be on a journey of faith, a God who makes of our lives a **Sacred Journey.**

It is a very old story in terms of literature, older than the stories of creation. It is, some believe, the first and fundamental Bible story.

It occurs in the middle of the Bronze Age, when people in the area where the story occurs are mostly nomads, merchants, a few settled farmers, but not very many. And what this story says with sweeping literary beauty is that in all the human history before, things have not gone well. People have rebelled against the basic rules of creation and the result has been alienation, separation, violence. This particular family, of which Abraham is the last member, is itself at a dead end... Old Abraham and his old wife, in their barrenness, are a metaphor for the human condition. They live without hope. They live without passion and love. They live in their settled stability, putting in time until they die, waiting day in and day out for their lives simply to play out.

And it is in their barrenness and hopelessness that they hear the voice calling them to move and promising them a future - as unlikely a promise as anyone ever heard (unless you count something Gabriel said to a young Jewish girl 1,500 years later, about her illegitimate child being the savior of the world). It is an outlandish, almost preposterous, promise. And Abraham and Sarah believe it, trust it. They pick up and go.

It's important because of what it says about God and about faith and about the world and our own journeys.

It says, first, that the reality of God is not located in the past, but in the future. It says that the power and energy of God is not so much pushing us from behind, out of our memories and traditions, but pulling us from ahead, out of our hope. It says that we do not live in a static, settled world, but one full of possibility because of the activity of God. It is, says Walter Bruggemann, an eloquent Old Testament scholar, a polemic against the notion that we live in a settled state, a static situation in which everything that can be already is. That posture, which is the arid world view of secularism, is essentially atheistic. If God has no power nor potential to change things, to create new possibilities, but exists only as a memory, it is reasonable to question whether that God exists in any meaningful way and consequently whether worshipping that God is anything other than an exercise in nostalgia or wishful thinking.

But the simple fact is that change is happening radically throughout the world. We are in the middle of an adventure and where it will end, even our best and brightest don't know. I was intrigued to read one commentator's observation that things begin to ferment spiritually for a generation or so before there is major change at a political level. So what we have witnessed transpiring in Eastern Europe has been a stirring of the human spirit for decades, a stirring we know has been occurring in the arts, and in religion long before it was expressed in the streets and the halls of government, a stirring this Abraham material suggests, is surely the activity of this amazing God of the future.

We live in the midst of incredible change, not stability... Megatrends 2,000 details ten major changes in the human situation. The opening sentences of the book set the pace -

> "We stand at the dawn of a new era. Before us is the most important decade in the history of civilization, a period of stunning technological innovation, unprecedented economic

opportunity, surprising political reform, and great cultural rebirth. It will be a decade like none that has come before." [p. 11, John Naisbitt and Patricia Aburdene]

In point of fact, our oldest story about God suggests that God is a God who likes change, stirs up change, calls people to change, wants people to be free and unencumbered enough to engage creatively with a new world God is creating.

And so the story says a lot about what it means to be faithful. Somewhere we got the idea that to have a religion is to obey the religious rules and believe certain ideas about God. That is, religion is ethics, negatively defined, and theological orthodoxy defined by tradition, custom. However, here in our earliest story, faith is a matter of following the voice, trusting the promise, and courage to live without security, relying on God's providence. Abraham isn't much of a theologian, is not an abstract thinker, doesn't say anything about the nature of God. He simply entrusts his future to God. It's what faith is in the Bible. And from beginning to end Abraham's trust is the example the Biblical writers use to illustrate faith.

Faith surely doesn't mean saintliness if by that word we mean the steadfast avoidance of the moral ambiguities of life in the world. Read on. As soon as Abraham is finished showing us what faith means he ends up in Egypt looking for food and because Sarah is an attractive woman and he knows will catch the eye of the Egyptians, convinces her to pretend she is his sister instead of his wife - to save his own skin, which is what happens. Sarah ends up as one of Pharoh's concubines for a while and Abraham gets rich because of the arrangement... until Pharoh discovers that she is actually Abraham's wife and returns her promptly. It is an appalling story, a tale of moral ambiguity and human culpability. And it demonstrates that faith is not moral saintliness.

Abraham and Sarah also have a word to us personally. In Alvin Toffler's important book several years ago, Future Shock, he argued that the way we cope with rapid change in the world around us and the mobility that makes us feel like modern nomads is by building into our lives what he called "personal stability zones"... "To compensate for the rapid change to which they are subjected some people restore dated automobiles, wear clothing styles of earlier eras, or hold rigidly to dated routines. When transience and turnover leave most things up for grabs, to what do people cling? At the deepest level what they cling to is a 'god.'" [see Proclamation 4, Lent, Robert Hughes, p. 27]

And Philip Wogaman in the book we are reading in the Lenten Academy, Faith & Fragmentation, takes a similar tack. One of the fragments of faith to which people are clinging is the "nostalgic vision" - a "vision of piety and church life as we knew it or as we fancy others knew it. It is faith turned inward and backward... In purely personal terms, it may recollect that 'no spot is so dear to my childhood as the little brown church in the dale,' the cherishing of familiar sentimental hymns, the clinging to childhood images of faith and childhood expressions of prayer." [p. 12-13]

The fact is we are talking about something that is a very real part of modern life. Change is frightening, threatening. It belongs to our humanity to want and need security, not adventure and when things outside get a little unstable, to devise "personal stability zones." Religion often becomes one... an experience we can count on to not need change... and to be full of reminders of a gentler, more stable past.

The Abraham and Sarah story is a personal summons to let go of that and to see our lives as a faith journey. It is a summons to think anew, to entertain the truly Biblical notion that God is and has always been present in our own lives, calling, pushing, prodding, enabling, discreetly and subtlety urging us into a new future, working against our tending to settle down and in, pull in our horizons and live with predictability but not much hope. The story is an invitation to think of your own past as a kind of **Sacred Journey**, but also your future. Frederick Buechner writes about it... About his surprising decision to enter theological seminary.

Looking back, from the perspective of thirty years, Buechner says eloquently, what many of us can only confess in humility and mystery - "it seems to me now that a power from beyond time was working to achieve its own aim through my aimless life in time as it works through the lives of us all and all our times." [The Sacred Journey, p. 95]

So the invitation is to trust this God with our future. To let go of the securities and certainties we have come to depend on. To see that we have made gods of them - our investments, our career, our relationships, our pension plans.

"Whatever your heart clings to and relies upon is your god," Martin Luther said. This very old story invites you to identify whatever that is in your life and to let it go: to live without the security and ego support it has provided you and to cling to God, God of the future, God of the journey.

This very old story reflects another story actually. The story of a man who one day walked by fishermen mending their nets and said, "follow me," and they laid down their nets and followed: a story of the one who calls us to discipleship which always means trusting him absolutely with our lives - our futures - even our deaths, letting go of everything.

The promise to Abraham was that there would be a future, a land, an heir and then a nation. Abraham, of course, wasn't personally going to see much of any of it. So what Abraham gets for trusting and following is God - God's company, God's presence, God's promise, God's love.

"Lo, I am with you always," Jesus said, "to the very end of the age."

Even in the darkness "I am with you." Even on the bad days as well as the good days, the ambiguous days, the days of failure as well as success - on every day of your journey "I am with you" which is why it is a **Sacred Journey.**

When I was reading in preparation for this sermon I happened upon something that illustrates. I was reading in Volume 1 of the Interpreter's

Bible, a ten volume commentary on the whole Bible, a slightly out-of-date, but still reliable standard reference work. Some of us own the whole ten volume set. I happen to own mine because a dear friend of mine left a note in her papers that if I were still around when she died, she'd like for me to have her set. She was a widow - a woman for whom the word "lady" is an appropriate description. She was active in church and civic affairs. For years she and a group of similar women met weekly to read and talk about the Bible. They were literate and well-to-do enough that some of them owned the whole Interpreter's Bible. It impressed me when I saw them on her shelves and I told her. It was on that same occasion that she alluded to the sadness and profound pain in her life; how she had had to think new thoughts and do things she never imagined she would have to do in order to maintain the most precious thing in her life, her relationship with her only daughter... She related how very difficult it was for her, both to keep some semblance of a relationship alive, but also to live without the grandchildren and normal family support she always assumed would give her comfort and joy in old age... This little group of women, faithfully and quietly reading the Bible, had sustained her for her very arduous journey. And so I was touched when reading the commentary for Genesis 12 and came upon a paragraph - which my friend Peggy underlined - I imagine, maybe on a day when her own journey was particularly difficult.

> "Faith is not the anchor but the hoisted sail. It is not the ship in harbour but the ship that puts out to sea. It is not holding onto something that is but exploration and adventure toward something vaster that lies ahead." [Interpreter's Bible, Vol. 1, p. 568]

God called Abraham and Sarah. God promised them a future.

God calls you, wherever you are, whoever you are.

God grant you and me - to hear the call, faith to follow and courage for the adventure, the **Sacred Journey**.

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You call us into the future, O God.. and you ask us to trust our lives to you. We confess that it is not easy to do. So in addition to your call, we ask for courage to follow and strength for the journey. Through Jesus Christ our Lord. Amen.